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ABSTRACT

Current training in writing for business and industry usually takes the form of short courses. However, the short course is an inappropriate way to teach writing because it is inefficient, represents writing behaviors or strategies inappropriate for some writers, rarely allows time for adequate criticism and revision, presents too much material in too short a time to allow writers to increase their skills, and does not use the executive's own proposals and reports to teach writing skills. Training as it exists now in many companies is adjunctive--added on to the on-going activities of the executives or managers. Long-term improvement in writing, however, will occur if the training is integrative--focusing upon the manager's own reports and proposals, both during and after their composition. An organization may establish an integrated writing program by (1) designing a formal training program of writing instruction; (2) training the company's writing instructor (or hiring an instructor); (3) changing the role of the editors so they revise for structure, organization, and clarity; and (4) encouraging executives to evaluate their own prose in group meetings. Measurable development requires continual, conscious practice and frequent coaching, the kind a short course cannot provide. (HOD)

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# Designing Writing Programs in Business and Industry

by Richard C. Freed

No competent executive or manager undervalues the importance of proficient writing. Cogent proposals win contracts, and well-written reports aid clients, helping to insure future business. Although good writing alone does not assure success, poorly written proposals and reports can guarantee failure. But writing proficiency is only one goal; writing efficiency is another. The writer who is blocked, the writer who spends too much time wrestling with the structure of a report or the organization of its paragraphs, the writer whose prose is so poorly written that others must spend considerable time revising it wastes his own time as well as that of his company and clients. Unfortunately, many executives and managers do not write as proficiently or efficiently as they might. How their written communication can be improved through a comprehensive, integrated program for teaching writing in business and industry is the subject of this article.

## Current Writing Training in Business and Industry

Outside the educational establishment, training in writing usually takes the form of short courses. Short courses are concentrated, thus saving the executive valuable time, and they are comprehensive, touching upon most of the problems in technical/professional communication an executive is likely to face. Unfortunately, however, a good deal of the last fifteen years' theory and research on the development of writing abilities suggests that the short course is a poor way to teach writing.

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To begin with, the short course is inefficient. Designed to provide an overview of general writing problems, it cannot often solve the specific problems of some writers; and structured as it necessarily must be, the short course demands that participants read and complete assignments in areas in which they might already be proficient.

Second, because short courses must generalize in their approach, they usually present writing "behaviors" or strategies inappropriate for some writers. One example of a writing behavior or strategy is outlining which short courses often suggest is a prerequisite to good writing. But many writers do not outline formally, and their prose may suffer rather than improve when they attempt to do so.

Third, short courses rarely allow time for adequate criticism and revision. All excellent writers have a well-developed critical faculty allowing them to view their prose as their reader would, thus permitting them to revise for better tone, structure, organization, style, and voice. In the absence of such a critical sense, developing writers must rely upon their teacher or editor to provide proper criticism for effective revision. The tutorial approach necessary for this response cannot usually be incorporated into a short course.

Fourth, the short course presents too much material in too short a time to allow writers to increase their skills. Developing writers improve most when they are given only two or three problems to master at one time.

Finally, the short course for the most part does not use the executive's own proposals and reports to teach writing skills. Often, the executive who can complete exercises on clarity and conciseness still has problems writing

clearly and concisely in his own reports.

Improving Writing Training in Business and Industry

The training in writing as it now exists at many companies is adjunctive--that is, it is added on, in the form of training sessions, to the on-going activities of the executives or managers. This kind of training places emphasis on the executive taking the short course and then applying, unsupervised, the lessons learned to his day-to-day writing.

Long-term improvement in writing, however, will occur if the training is not adjunctive but integrative, if the training is not isolated from but focuses upon the manager's own reports and proposals, both while they are being and after they have been composed. Such training concentrates on the individual's own weaknesses and composing strategies. It involves identifying weaknesses in the manager's writing, designing strategies to overcome those problems and, finally, evaluating the writer's solutions, once again through an examination of the manager's own prose.

How can writing training become integrative at a particular company? That depends on the company, for a writing program effective for one organization will not necessarily be as effective for another. Different organizations have different structures, and thus the training program should be tailored to meet the individual needs of each.

For illustrative purposes, however, we might consider a fictional organization, call it Management Services, Inc. (MSI), which relies a good deal on written communication to conduct its business. MSI is a large management consulting firm employing about 200 consultants at three national offices.

At the central office are three editors who read most of MSI's reports and proposals (but only for grammar, mechanics, and format), and a training group which designs or administers programs in public speaking and writing for all the offices.

In the past the training group has used a number of short courses in writing. No matter which course has been tried, however, the participants have been divided in their evaluation of its effectiveness, perhaps half believing that their writing skills had somewhat improved and half thinking the course was minimally effective or worse. In brief the training group is dissatisfied with its present and past writing programs, but it has little idea how to act on its dissatisfaction because, after all, it has tried many of the respected courses on the market.

The training group's problems may lie, not in its administration of the courses or with the competence of its instructors, but with the nature of short courses themselves. MSI doesn't need to purchase yet another short course but to establish an integrated writing program by:

1. Designing a formal training program of writing instruction
2. Training the company's writing instructor (or hiring an instructor)
3. Changing the role of the editors so they revise for structure, organization, and clarity
4. Encouraging executives to evaluate their own prose in group meetings.

These points are discussed in detail below.

## The Formal Training Program in Writing

A training program adopting an integrated approach could be roughly

similar to a correspondence course in which students work through a structured sequence of readings and other assignments, at their own pace, submitting one assignment only after the previous one has been evaluated. Unlike a correspondence course, however, the training program would require frequent conferences between participant and instructor, perhaps one fifteen-minute conference each week. During the conferences, the instructor would evaluate the participant's writing and set limited but specific goals for the writer to achieve by the next conference. The following example indicates how the course might be structured.

When Tom Nelson meets for the first time with his writing instructor, he receives during their half-hour discussion a brief textbook on technical writing and a series of assignments. Although each assignment has a suggested due date, Tom knows that the course is self-paced. Thus, should his other duties keep him unusually busy during a certain period, he could complete the assignment as time permits.

Assume Tom's first assignment concerns wordiness. After reading the chapter in the text, Tom completes a series of exercises and then records an entry in his journal, perhaps describing with what difficulty or ease he finished the assignments, what he learned from them, etc. The journal's purpose is to make the writer conscious of his writing problems and of the strategies he has employed to overcome them.

Then Tom examines his own writing (an already-completed report, for example, or one he is composing), looking for problems identified in the textbook and illustrated by the exercises. He recasts some of the prob-

lemmatic sentences or paragraphs and records another entry in his journal.

Sometime after handing in the completed exercises, the journal, and the original and revised passages from his own report, Tom arranges a fifteen-minute conference with the writing instructor who reviews the unit completed and looks ahead to the unit following.

This format has a number of advantages:

1. Self-paced and tutorial, the program does not require the executives to spend large amounts of time (as in a short course) away from their other duties or, as in the case of a short course held on the weekend, away from their families.
2. If the company conducts its business through a number of offices, the program can be used easily at the other offices. Although the writing instructor could be based in the central office, the writing assignments could be submitted by mail and the conferences conducted by telephone.
3. Money needn't be spent to compose a text for the training program because a syllabus could be constructed to be used with any competently written technical writing textbook on the market.
4. The writer's own specific problems are dealt with. If, for a certain writer, organization is a major problem and style a minor one, the participant could spend several weeks on the former and only one week on the latter.
5. The writer's own specific strengths and composing strategies are identified and strengthened.
6. During each conference, a limited number of weaknesses can be identi-

fied so that the writer is not overwhelmed after being told to remedy a large number of problems in a short time.

7. The tutorial approach provides the executive with patient, constructive, non-threatening criticism, thus helping him to build confidence in his writing ability.
8. This criticism can relate to the manager's current writing projects, the writing instructor thus serving, in a small way, as the manager's editor.

Training the Writing Instructor

Much of the training program's success depends upon the competence of the writing instructor who, at any given time, could supervise ten or more managers in the writing program. The writing instructor should be a self-starter, capable of creatively working with the executives, revising the training program as needs might require, establishing inventories of individuals' writing problems and setting goals to eliminate those problems, keeping current of writing theory, perhaps designing tests in written communication to help screen potential employees, and conducting short seminars for executives on various aspects of written communication.

Some companies may wish to hire a new employee who is an experienced and capable teacher. There are many such people around, more in fact than can obtain desirable positions in academia. And their salaries, by business standards, are not high. A writing instructor can be recruited through ads placed in the Modern Language Association (MLA) Job Information List, the Chronicle of Higher Education, and the Conference on College Composition and

Communication (CCCC) Job List. Semi-finalists can be interviewed at the December MLA convention or the 4C's convention in March. Many writing specialists plan to interview at 4C's; all candidates pay their own way to MLA or 4C's.

Other companies already employing editors or individuals responsible for staff training in writing might find it desirable to alter those employees' job responsibilities or retrain them as writing instructors. The employees could be advised to enroll in graduate courses in composition or writing theory. Or the company could hire a writing consultant to retrain the employees, at least through a program of directed reading. The excellent writing consultant may be conversant with the latest, relevant developments in rhetoric and linguistics, cognitive and developmental psychology, the philosophies of language and cognition, neurology and neurophysiology, error analysis, discourse theory, evaluation, and testing.

Changing the Role of the Editors

The editors at some companies do little more than read for grammatical and mechanical errors and check for format. To be sure, these tasks are the only ones necessary if the proposals and reports are excellently written. If they are not, then the editors should do what most good editors do, including wholesale revision. But such revision isn't the end of it. The editor should explain to the writer the problems demanding revision. The author should then discuss those problems with the writing instructor so they can plan strategies to overcome them. The editors, however, need not explain the writing problems in every report or proposal they receive, only

in those written by executives currently enrolled in the formal writing program. Thus, the editors should be provided a weekly or monthly roster of the people currently taking the course.

Instituting Peer Evaluation

Peer evaluation involves groups of writers identifying weaknesses and merits of their writing, usually without the help of a writing teacher. It is similar to the Quality Circle Concept used so successfully by Japanese manufacturers. The rationales are simple and commonsensical:

1. Writers have a better sense of the strengths and weaknesses in others' prose than they do of the problems and merits of their own. But the more writers are allowed to respond to the prose of others, the better critics they become of their own.
2. Writers who rely too much on their teacher for criticism of their work do not develop the editorial competence to criticize their own work. Peer evaluation, however, forces writers not to use their teacher as a crutch, thus helping them develop their own critical faculties.
3. Peer evaluation helps writers develop a better sense of audience. By working in a group which criticizes his writing, the executive learns to anticipate the needs of readers.
4. The other group members thus function in part as the writer's editors.

One half-hour evaluation session a week would be desirable. The meetings, of course, could be part of the executives' on-going activity as they compose their proposals and reports. To be most effective, the meetings should be rigorously structured, the executives examining their work according to

specific criteria enumerated by handouts provided by the writing instructor.

Conclusion

The attractions of short courses in writing are more cosmetic than pedagogically sound. Neatly packaged and relatively easy to schedule and administer, they have been and continue to be one of the most popular forms of writing training in business and industry. But an individual's writing skills will show no more improvement after just two or three days of intensive practice than will a musician's piano playing or a ballplayer's hitting. Like these latter skills, writing is also a skill, and one that develops slowly and often painfully. Measurable development requires continual, conscious practice and frequent coaching, the kind a short course cannot provide.

In contrast to the short course, the program outlined above is comprehensive and integrated, providing the executive or manager with training related directly to his own writing projects, not only in the writing course itself but also through the comments he receives in the group meetings and from the editors. Perhaps the most important aspect of the program is the structure for learning it creates. As just one person increases his own writing proficiency by completing the writing course, he necessarily helps others increase their writing skills during the peer evaluation meetings. Writing competence thus becomes contagious, eventually infecting the whole organization.